

FEATURED AUTHOR

Nicolas Liu on
"Imagine Sisyphus Exploited"

EDITORS

Elizabeth Zhu
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VOLUME 2

Dialexicon



July 2022

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Editorial Letters

I could not be more excited to welcome you, the reader, to Volume 2 of the Dialexicon Journal!

This journal was created to provide high school students with the opportunity to write critically about topics at the intersection of philosophy and current events. My hope in creating Dialexicon was to encourage more youth like myself to not only become interested in philosophy (and all the wonders it has to offer!) but to provide a platform for young people to publish their work to the world.

Last year, our published authors hailed from Canada, Greece, England, the United States, and Hungary. This year, Dialexicon's submissions continue to prove that philosophy captivates youth around the world.

Following in the footsteps of the first volume of the journal, this second volume of Dialexicon continues to work towards our aim of showcasing high quality philosophy papers which tackle pressing current issues. Our 2022 published authors wrote convincing arguments on important topics such as whether vaccines should be mandatory, relativism in the face of fake news, doubts about personal identity, and the absurdity of capitalism. In a world that is one of the most polarized in history, we desperately need the clarity that philosophical thought brings.

Thank you for reading our journal, and thank you to everyone who was involved in the publication of Dialexicon - from our adjudicators to all those working to build the organization. Most of all, thank you to everyone who wrote for Dialexicon for your fascinating papers, and kudos to those published!

Sincerely,
Elizabeth Zhu
Founder, Co-President

It is well-known that there is a lack of opportunities for youth interested in philosophy. As one of those high school students in the past, I was originally struggling to find a place to engage myself, until I found Dialexicon. Dialexicon started as a way to fill that gap and allow students to explore philosophy vis-à-vis their writing. Reflecting on current social events through a philosophical lens is a powerful technique to learn and embrace. I was fortunate to be able to join the team and am now a Co-President alongside Elizabeth. Working together this year, we were able to bring this reflection to many students all over the globe with our critically engaging prompts and our expansion of the organization to further our mission of spreading philosophy to young people everywhere.

Although I did not adjudicate the submissions, I had the enriching experience of reading and reviewing them. I enjoyed reading not just the original and clear work but also work that forwards a concise and coherent argument - as all philosophy papers do (or should do). The adjudicators from The Philosophy Foundation and the University of Toronto Philosophy Department shared this sentiment and wrote highly of the submissions. The papers published in this journal excel in several categories, and we're proud to bring them to you.

Thank you to the students who submitted, the members of our Discord community, the teacher-supervisors, and the adjudicators who provided valuable comments and support for all submissions. We look forward to reading and publishing more work from students everywhere in our next issue!

Sincerely,
Saurish Srivastava
Co-President

Imagine Sisyphus Exploited

The Absurdity of Late Stage Capitalism

By Nicolas Liu



A person making \$5000 a day from the time Columbus sailed to America to today would still have less money than what Jeff Bezos makes in a week. Our present economic systems are exploitative and have become increasingly so to the point that they are nothing short of the philosophical conceptions of absurdity. In this paper I draw from Thomas Nagel and Albert Camus to substantiate this claim and ultimately conclude that today's workers must reconsider their relationship with capitalist production to challenge an absurd existence.

Werner Sombart's definition of late-stage capitalism—a system characterized by injustice, crisis, and inequality—applies to today's economy. The reality of our present systems fulfills Nagel's requirement for personal absurdity, which occurs when there is “a discrepancy between pretension or aspiration and reality.”

The media and world and industry leaders often propagate that hard work and fiscal responsibility pay off in the form of economic success and social mobility. Such narratives are capitalism's pretenses, ones covering the truth: that workers are cogs in systems that deny them of the full value of labor, and means to the ends of maximized corporate profit. COVID-19 has done much to reveal this reality - since the pandemic began, American billionaires have collectively made four trillion dollars while the employment rate of low-income Americans has dropped 40%. American wealth inequality is at an all-time high, and still the call for workplace protections and higher minimum wages is labeled as radical and insurgent.

Clearly, the agency that individual workers have in improving their lot in a late-stage capitalist system is a myth. Nagel gives us ways to resist personal absurdity - by “modifying [one's] aspirations, or by trying to bring reality into better accord with them, or by removing [oneself] from the situation entirely.” Late-stage capitalism renders these responses futile: current demands for improved working conditions are already so low that further modification of them would be near-indistinguishable from no change at all, and as participation in late-stage capitalist systems is bound by financial necessity, removal from such systems often comes with

complete loss of livelihood. I am reminded of when amidst the recent tornadoes that have devastated the Midwest, workers in Kentucky were threatened with firing when they wanted to leave their factories.

The absurdity of late-stage capitalism lies not in the futility of fighting against it, but rather its continued acceptance. Nagel writes that the explicitness of an absurd system does not always constitute extrication from it, but in fact absurdity arises when humans “ignore the doubts that we know cannot be settled, [and continue] to live with nearly undiminished seriousness in spite of them.” Thus it also is imperative to apply Nagel’s framework of philosophical absurdity, which emerges from the “perception of something universal - some respect in which pretension and reality inevitably clash for us all.”

This “undiminished seriousness” with which we live often becomes impulse and habit-driven, and participation in a late-stage capitalist system can be characterized similarly. Perpetual doubt is realized when we self-reflect with what Nagel refers to as a “backwards step;” in our case, this can be taken as an examination of the structures behind late-stage capitalism. By taking Nagel’s step, we find that many previously-held conceptions are in fact unsubstantiated, that they rest on “responses and habits we never question, that we should not know how to defend without circularity.” This circularity is clear in defenses of late-stage capitalism: we participate in these systems to survive, but such a requirement would not exist if not for the establishment of the system in the first place.

Philosophical absurdity arises when we choose to step forward once more - when we discover our exploitation, but choose to keep participating in light of it. An Amazon worker must continue to work with near-mechanical efficiency if they want to keep their job, and a single mother living in poverty has few alternatives to picking up more minimum-wage shifts. Participation in late-stage capitalism forces a divide between the capacity for self-reflection and action; workers work knowing that doing so is unjust. The fact that anticapitalist theory is challenged by how we have no choice but to continue participating in a capitalist economy is, quite frankly, absurd.

Camus’ encouragement is imperfect in regards to the current reality of labor - in fact, applying it would uncomfortably resemble gilded-age neurasthenia and the workaholic “hustle culture” pushed by contemporary media influencers. If we hope to alleviate the plight of exploited workers in a late-stage capitalist system, we must not entirely agree with him. Our viewing Sisyphus as happy does not detract from his objective suffering; likewise, participation in a capitalist system should not preclude us from amending it.

Thus to deal with the absurdity of late-stage capitalism, workers must maintain Nagel's "backwards step" and aspects of Camus' happiness at the same time. Nagel urges us to confront absurdity head-on, writing that self-awareness is the first step in destroying mental subjugations. We must "notice that ... we are content to allow justifications of belief to come to an end at certain points," and apply these realizations to our new views on the world. In the meantime, we must accept that Camus was right in urging us to continue living with absurdity. Like how Nagel maintains that actions are justified proximally, actions with immediate benefits like putting food on the table and seeking higher education still need to be done despite their involvement in the system of late-stage capitalism.

But while the absurdity of late-stage capitalism may be inescapable, it might not be entirely inflexible. "Skepticism begins when we include ourselves in the world about which we claim knowledge," Nagel says, and accordingly, we must never lose sight of the problems inherent to the systems we participate in. We can participate in late-stage capitalism and work against it simultaneously; for example, working alongside pursuing progressive education, or buying exclusively from corporations that enfranchise their workers. In the meantime, we need to find meaning in life and labor that exists separately from productive value—while we can sell paintings for a livelihood, we ought also to use the artistic process for self-discovery.

In a particular section of "The Absurd," Nagel tells us that mice lack the self-transcendental capabilities to comprehend absurdity, and as such live unfettered by it. But if finding joy in absurdity requires us to imagine ourselves mice, then let us at least be unionized ones.

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Mandatory Vaccines?

The Djokovic Case

By Marianna Stamatiou



Novack Djokovic's refusal to be vaccinated constituted one of the sporting world's most controversial topics in the beginning of 2022. The discussions revolved around the tantalizing question of whether the top tennis player could still participate in the Australian Open.

The medical exemption granted to allow Djokovic's participation, despite being unvaccinated, ignited a backlash all around the world. On the other hand, a support movement was risen while many protests occurred in his favor. However, it was an earlier statement of the Serbian athlete which formed a precursor for the remarkable stirring his arrival has sparked in Australia.

That statement introduced serious issues around a certain ideology, specifically around Djokovic's particular stance towards compulsoriness: "I hope [mandatory vaccination to athletes] will never happen, because I have always believed and continue to believe in the right to choice." The main concern arises from the specific concomitance of the concept of compulsoriness, and consequently of freedom, with the core concept of collectivity, in terms of an absolute necessity.

Is there a right to choose when we are referring to an unprecedented global event involving a high cost in human life? What happens when our own decision, about confronting a life threatening situation, collides with the lives of others? On the occasion of Djokovic's given statement about individual choice, though without any reference to everyone's duties in the midst of a pandemic crisis from his side, I will attempt to make my argument. The central issue focuses on whether vaccination should be a matter of personal choice or state-driven mandate.

Even from the outbreak of the pandemic, eminent constitutionalists and law professionals are confronting a problematic line that mainly disputes the legality, as well as the constitutionality, of the decisions made by the government. These are serious allegations that could undermine democracy itself. The majority of the experts argue that the restrictions, unprecedented for our era and Western culture, that have been allegedly violated the basic individual, political and socio-economic rights "are within the principle of legality and the lawful state." Given their argumentation, for its supporters, the obligation to receive a vaccination, and the act of vaccination itself, constitute an act of solidarity towards all human beings. In effect, human rights in light of the individual perspective are expanding for the protection of public health.

On the other hand, prompted by some interpretations about positions proposed by bioethics, several experts argue that any threatening public health issue could also threaten the principles of autonomy and self-determination of the individual (see the workings and publications of UNESCO's International Bioethics Committee). According to these principles, each person is responsible for the care of his/her own health. Therefore, public health must be safeguarded through free will and no compulsory self-action, accompanied by state consent for his/her fundamental rights. After all, they argue that there can be no public health without respect for human rights. An "act of solidarity," such as vaccination, could not be imposed absolutely and explicitly "by law enforcement". However, is the person capable enough to safeguard his/her health in such a state of emergency, raising the issue of their 'right' to finally abstain from the solution recommended unreservedly by the medical community? Can Djokovic decide which is good or not against a threat of such a scale, not only for himself, but for all the others?

It is an indisputable fact that, for several people who depend on the emergency measures against it, the COVID-19 pandemic could impose the strictest possible discipline on people through an extensive control of every aspect of their lives. These measures may concerningly pave the way for further degradation of individual rights. Consequently, these dramatic conditions strengthen to an unconventional high level of the so-called biopower that is imposed through the institutionalization of biopolitics. In the context of biopolitical capitalism, first explored by Michel Foucault, the imposition of power is not intended to manage and determine individuals' behaviors, but to determine and control their biological life. In general, biopolitics is a lever of power in modern societies, deeply ingrained in capitalist principles.

On the other hand, for the main thinkers of the social contract, Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau, state power must be based on the consent of people. This is achieved through an agreed social contract between the state and the citizen or through an ever-renewing process of "democracy legitimacy." The purpose of all these processes is to define and maintain a "red line" that will guarantee the protection of citizens and the preservation of their fundamental rights. At this point the question arises: can legally grounded fundamental rights, guaranteed by the state, be the spearhead in designing a biopolitical protection scheme against a global health issue? The answer is negative, since the individual nature of human rights, where humans are viewed as a "social unit", moves in the opposite direction compared to biopolitics. This is because such social policies are applied to groups and classes, their subject matter being collective, not individualistic. As a result, human rights act as a kind of obstacle on the exercise of power and the implementation of biopolitics.

But what should we do, while this pandemic is raging? Perhaps this pandemic, after its catastrophic onslaught and the heavy price in human life losses, can be transformed into an opportunity for critical reflection. For instance, why do we witness this "paradox" of people denying the life-saving vaccine while evidence about its effectiveness abounds?

One reason for the persistence of vaccination deniers lies in the fact that the vaccine has been promoted either as privilege – mainly one of occupational status – or as something that

should be enforced by law, or even a profitable way that leads to the state-citizen relationship being a "zero-sum" game at the expense of the people. In this point, we observe that Djokovic uses the argument of the certain occupational status to achieve the opposite effect. Nevertheless, the key to vaccination's universal acceptance could be placed in its proposal as a right, such as the undeniable right of every human being to receive, from the lawful state, free education services as well as high-level health services. Few, in our opinion, would be the "education deniers" as opposed to "vaccination deniers". At the very least, no one has openly and solidly challenged the long-established tenet in Western societies that education should be compulsory, at least to a certain level.

I believe, however, that this relationship can be transformed into a "win-win" game, with a Nash equilibrium balances where everyone wins, both the state and the citizen. This, in my consideration, has been established with education, with the "golden" balance of "profit for all" to mean the profit for the state through a well-functioning society with citizens who know and act knowledgeably, but also to mean profit for citizens through the acquisition of the necessary knowledge. Vaccination is a right, so all that remains is to create the right state-citizen game from which the best profit balance will emerge for all: including states, societies, a great athlete like Djokovic and every other human being.

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The Ethics of Mandatory Vaccines

Why Governments Should Take the Plunge

By Jerry Zhang



Aristotle elucidates in his *Nicomachean Ethics* that “the common good” should be the moral criterion upon which political action is decided, because there is greater value in the common good than the individual good (Aristotle & Rackham, 2003). Amid the third wave of COVID-19, with new variants like Omicron, the state has reason to mandate a vaccination policy to protect all social members as they develop herd immunity. A mandatory vaccine policy compels all individuals, except those with incompatible medical conditions, to get vaccinated. Though many resist vaccination due to religious beliefs and doubts about its efficacy, I argue that mandating widespread vaccination is morally permissible.

To support the notion that mandatory vaccination is ethical, I will begin by discussing how individual vaccinations will benefit the entire society. Namely, individuals have an obligation to get vaccinated, because of the concepts of utilitarianism and deontological ethics.

First, mandatory vaccination policies are condoned through a utilitarian framework (Giubilini et al., 2018). Utilitarian ethics, a consequentialist theory, focuses on the outcome, believing that the most ethical action is one that benefits the greatest number of people. According to Alberto Giubilini, senior research fellow at the Oxford Uehiro Centre for Practical Ethics,

vaccines are “90-95% [effective] at preventing people from getting sick” from COVID-19 (Giubilini & Jain, 2021). When everyone is vaccinated, the population achieves herd immunity, a status in which everyone is immune to COVID-19. Herd immunity is a collective good. By diminishing the spread of COVID-19 and reducing fatality rates, vaccination protects the lives of billions. The non-excludable and nonrival nature of vaccines allows everyone to benefit from not getting COVID-19 and not spreading it to others. Herd immunity protects the most vulnerable within communities: children who are too young to be safely vaccinated, individuals who are allergic to vaccines or are immunosuppressed, and individuals for whom the vaccine is ineffective. Therefore, it is morally justifiable to mandate vaccination so individuals are protected from catching COVID-19 and spreading it to those who cannot receive the vaccine.

Second, the deontological approach also supports the vaccine mandate. Deontological ethics, a type of normative ethical theory, considers an action to be good because of some characteristic of the action rather than the result of the action. Critics may argue that, since the number of unvaccinated people is limited, the consequences of their actions are marginal. However, the generalization principle, which states that a certain action is wrong if the action is significantly worse when done by everybody, offers justification for mandating vaccines (Giubilini et al., 2018). While the consequences from a few unvaccinated people are insignificant, universal non-vaccination would have undeniable harmful effects. Therefore, according to the generalization principle, imposing universal vaccination is ethical.

Another line of deontological reasoning is contractualism, which defines a social contract that exists between oneself and others. John Locke said humans “are obliged under the law of nature to respect each other’s rights to life, liberty, and property” (Britannica, 2021). COVID-19 endangers the right to life for many vulnerable members of society, who cannot get vaccinated for medical reasons. Thus, the government is obligated to mandate vaccinations for those who can get vaccinated to protect those who cannot, in accordance with the social contract.

To further my argument, I would like to establish an analogy between vaccine refusal and tax evasion. Across the world, compulsory taxation is enforced in societies. The tax system compels individuals to a reciprocal duty by contributing financially to their communities, and the money collected is spent on providing for and protecting everyone by funding health care and education systems. Just as taxes are paid at the cost of the individual to benefit the entire community, wherein the principle of fairness rests on everyone giving a sum of money proportional to his or her income, the same reasoning applies to compulsory vaccination. Individuals have a reciprocal obligation, which is partially accomplished with vaccination, to protect the safety of their communities. Like compulsory taxation, universal vaccination achieves ubiquitous benefits for all, such as herd immunity. Moreover, it is only fair that everyone in the community makes a fair sacrifice for the collective good. Since compulsory vaccination fulfills the same moral criteria as compulsory taxation, mandated vaccine policies are equally reasonable.



Aside from individual obligation, an equal burden is placed on the government. According to Locke, governments exist to promote the public good (Theriault, 2009). Therefore, within a democracy, which caters to the interests of the majority, those who govern must value utilitarian ethics above other perspectives.

Opponents frequently counter the notion of universal vaccination by defending an individual's right to choose. Many people reject the vaccine due to self-interest, doubting its efficacy, or religious restrictions. For example, the Dutch Reformed Church discourages vaccination because it "interferes with divine providence" (King, 2021). Under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedom, "Canadians are free to follow the religion of their choice." When the government impedes religious beliefs by forcing vaccines onto people, it is considered an unethical violation of human rights.

However, COVID-19 can be lethal for many people, potentially endangering their right to life. The right to life is a prerequisite for a person to access the right to choose. As John Stuart Mills argues, "your freedom is limited by the harm it could do to others" (The Ethics Centre, 2021). In the context of vaccines, individuals lack the right to freedom when it poses a risk to the health of others; therefore, individuals are obligated to help reduce the transmission of COVID-19 (Rieder, 2021). By this logic, because the spread of the virus threatens to deny people the right to life, the principal argument that I present outweighs the counterargument.

Some would still argue that there is a high cost associated with mandatory vaccinations. The potential risk of vaccine-related side effects threaten the public image of vaccines. However, I would argue that the media has sensationalized the dangers of vaccines, terrorizing the population.

Experts from John Hopkins Medicine strongly encourage everyone to take the vaccine, because vaccines are scientifically proven to be "highly effective in preventing serious disease" (Maragakis & Kelen, 2021). There is no cost high enough to make the action supererogatory. Therefore, a duty of easy rescue exists: if an action is inexpensive, and the benefit to the third party outweighs the cost, then everyone is obligated to undertake the action.

To illustrate this duty, I posit the following thought experiment. If a child is drowning in a lake beside me, and the only cost to save the child is my new pair of running shoes, any rational actor would choose to save the child, since the cost of shoes is far less than that of a life. In the case of COVID-19, the cost of getting vaccinated is far less than the countless number of lives saved.

In conclusion, I firmly argue that a universal vaccine mandate is morally permissible through an analysis of individual obligation from a utilitarian perspective. Additionally, the utilitarian benefits supersede other ethical lenses within a democratic society. While many view vaccine mandates as strenuous acts involving individual sacrifice, the penance is small compared to the number of lives protected.

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Relativism's Rise and the Death of Truth

By Lucy Fan

The Greek philosopher Protagoras is credited with positing truth as a relative concept, and in his most famous statement declares that 'man is the measure of all things', rejecting the existence of an objective truth.

Indeed, this year has been fraught with arguments on what constitutes truth, with disparities in ideology and opinion fuelling already seething tensions and political polarisation, from the disputed cause of the Capitol riot to the irreconcilable differences in response to the Rittenhouse trial. Throughout this essay I will explore the philosophy of relativism, the conflation of truth and the belief of truth, and ultimately argue against Protagoras' assertion, suggesting that truth exists only as an absolute and that it is not detached from objective reality, but rather inextricably bound to it.

The philosophy of relativism proposes that there are a plurality of truths that can exist concurrently, each dictated by subjective experience and belief. This is perhaps aptly summarised in Plato's Protagoras, a dialogue wherein he is imagined to remark that 'what is true for you is true for you, and what is true for me is true for me', essentially allowing for a near infinite number of valid truths for what each person believes to be true. However, if the validity of a proposition is relative, and the number of valid truths is almost unlimited, there must be people who think it false, and vice versa. A question immediately arises from this: how can these claims be simultaneously true? Philosophy has long operated upon the assumption that there is a binary of true and false- to accommodate this would require the complete dismantling of this basic principle.

The problem this poses reveals a fallacy of relativism, as even if I accept the existence of half-truths, or something in between, this in itself counters the idea of it being a complete truth for any person, which relativism states would be the case. Another issue is that the validity of subjective statements may be 'true' within a particular framework, but would not exist together with other contradictory ones. If I believed in God, but my friend did not, we could both theoretically be correct according to our own standards, but not alongside each other.

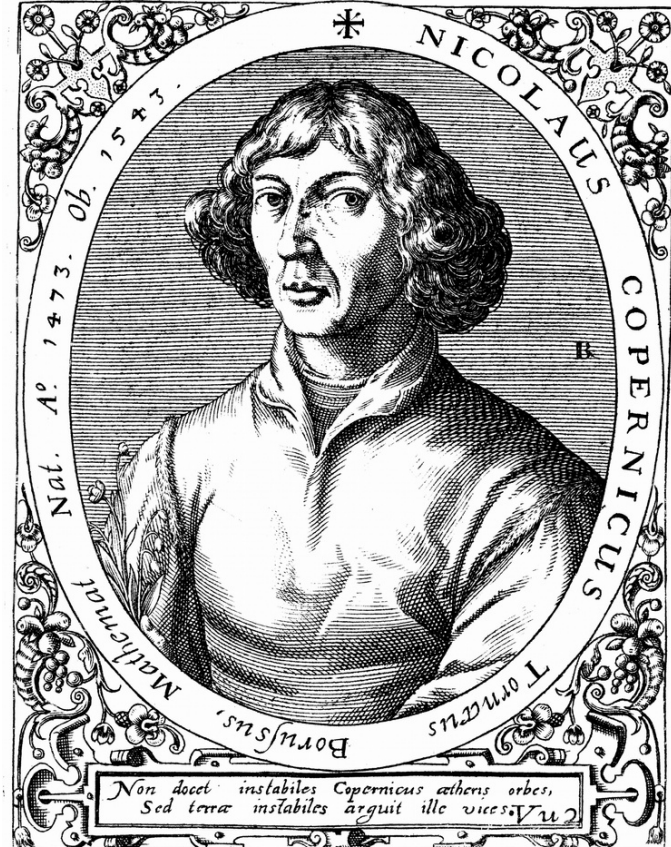
In order to explore this further, I will go on to argue that truth is subject to personal belief.

However, I will argue that believing that a proposition is true is not synonymous with it being true. Partisanship in news broadcasting and widespread misinformation has contributed to falsely designating 'fake news' as 'true'; a problem only exacerbated by the proliferation of voice cloning and deepfakes. To give a political example, Donald Trump's proclamations that he had won a 'in a landslide' in the 2020 US elections were vastly at odds with the data, which showed that he had lost 232 votes to 306, and the reality of Biden's subsequent inauguration. If the truth was dictated by personal belief, surely he would still be in office today, but this is clearly not the case.

A claim is also not true solely by virtue of it being believed; if we could confer validity to a statement by believing it, then world hunger and disease would be solved simply by believing that they were no longer issues. And if an individual's perception of the truth is what defines truth, then they must hold all of their beliefs to be true, disallowing for revisions or the idea that they could be mistaken or false. Finally, a truth can exist without belief, such as if someone is not confident in supporting a truth, it does not take away from the validity of the truth, making it simply an unconscious justified true belief. Therefore, the truth must be independent of individual beliefs.

This necessitates the question - what is truth? If truth is not a relative concept, then it must be an absolute, that is to say a fact. This is in accordance with correspondence theory, which states that in order for something to be true, it must correspond with a fact.

Some may argue that if truth is fact, then this is incompatible with how various scientific theories that have since proved false, for example before Copernicus' model, the Sun was believed to be at the centre of the universe, and even now we have no 'real' knowledge of whether this now is true or not. To counter this, a distinction must be made between truth and knowledge, for knowledge of the truth can be flawed or incomplete due to human limitations and the constraints of the time. A lack of knowledge of the truth is not the same as there being no truth at all. Truth remains infallible, and there can only exist one version of the absolute truth, which may be outside of human experience, but may exist nonetheless, remaining uninfluenced by human notions of truth and falsity.



"the Sun was believed to be at the centre of the universe"

There is also the issue of whether an objective reality exists, and some may use this to say that if nothing is 'real', then it cannot be 'true'. Regardless of whether we believe an objective reality exists, there must be one version of the truth that occurs. If an innocent victim is found guilty of a crime, the objective truth remains that, despite the perceived truth that they were not. Regardless of belief, they were innocent, which proves that there is most likely an eternal and unchanging truth that exists divorced from bias and subjectivity.

I will also consider the overarching idea that 'truth is relative'. If the idea that truth is relative is 'true', this would also signify that the statement itself is relative, effectively cancelling it out, as it would still mean that there are absolute truths. If the statement was assumed to be an absolute, it would then provide in itself an example of an absolute truth, rendering this statement logically incoherent.

To conclude, relativism invites doubt and deliberate distortions of objective reality, and although everyone is entitled to their own beliefs, it is evident that the truth cannot be swayed by or confused with these beliefs. From examining the philosophy of relativism and counterarguments against the objectivity of truth, I maintain that there can be no such thing as a relative truth: in order to uphold the very nature of truth, it must be final and universal.

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Does Identity Exist?



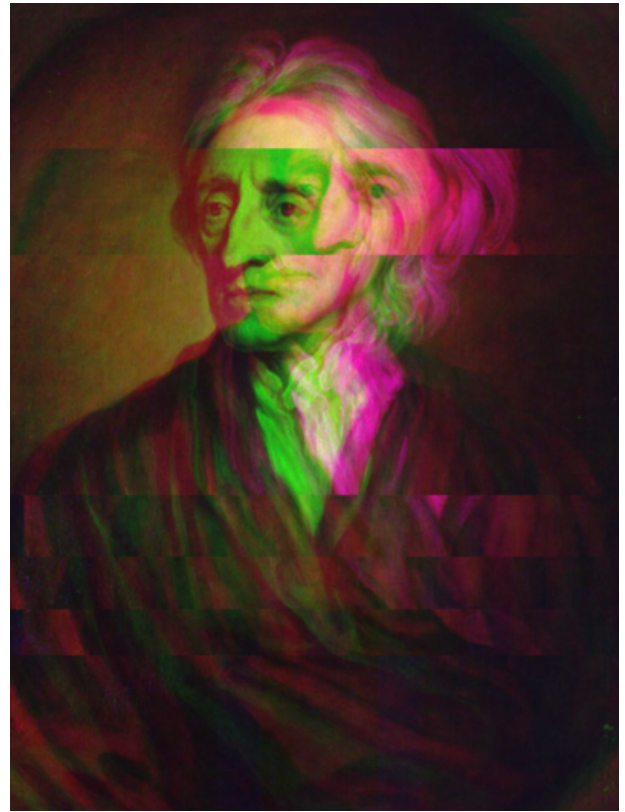
By Gabi Casals

Identity is a concept that helps us navigate the world. Being identified using facial recognition software, a Social Security number, or even our economic status are ways we are differentiated every day. But what is the root of our identity? Many would not say that their Social Security number is what makes them who they are. Even our genetics are a questionable indicator of who we are when we consider identical twins or influences of epigenetics. So what actually makes an individual an individual? What is the essential property of our identity? Attempting to answer this question is more complicated than its face value. Through critical analysis and deductive reasoning we can come to the conclusion that an essential property does not exist. In order to understand arguments against personal identity, we must first understand arguments in favor of personal identity.

A common response to the question of personal identity is the Body Theory. Founded by numerous philosophers, the Body Theory of personal identity is summarized as follows: personal identity must exist because we remain in the same body throughout our entire lives. Body Theory accounts for changes in beliefs, memories, and preferences of an individual and states that even if those aspects of an individual change, they are still themselves because they remain in the same body. But this theory does not hold up when taking a deeper look. Our bodies are changing constantly. Our baby teeth fall out, our red blood cells die and regenerate, and the lining of our stomach replaces itself as quickly as every five days. Our genetic makeup is influenced by our environment and substances we may consume. Our appearance even changes when we get a tattoo or lose weight. Are we still the same person after going through those changes? How many changes can we make to our physical bodies until we are no longer ourselves? By the time a person reaches adulthood their body is almost completely different from the one they had at birth, so our bodies cannot be the essential property of identity. But arguments favoring identity existing in our minds can be rebutted.

17th century philosopher John Locke held the belief that identity could be found in the non-physical aspects of an individual. He thought we were tied to our identity because we held a

continuous consciousness throughout our lives. We know this simple claim cannot be the answer because it is technically untrue: when we sleep our consciousness discontinues, and people in comas might not experience consciousness for years. So, Locke provided the Memory Theory of Personal Identity, which states that we are who we are because of our memories; we gain memories of who we are over time and they cultivate an identity of ourselves. He recognized that we are incapable of remembering all of our past experiences, but the events we can remember prove we are connected to a version of our past selves, meaning an identity persists over time. For example, if an individual can remember all the way back to their fifth birthday party, they are linked to that version of themselves. They are the only individual with that exact experience and have memories that no one else that attended the birthday party had. Their one-of-a-kind memories are what make them who they are.



"we are who we are because of our memories"



"viewed identity as a collection of parts, or a 'bundle'"

However, many holes can quickly be found in Locke's argument. Memory is complicated. According to Locke's theory, none of us are the same person as we were when we were born due to infantile amnesia, and probably do not start developing identity until about two years later when the memory areas of the infant brain are developed. Are newborns nobody? Memories can also be lost completely. Consider an individual who has amnesia due to a brain injury. They still have the same mannerisms, preferences, skills, and physical appearance, but they cannot remember their past. Is their identity completely destroyed? Memories can even be altered or changed over time, and false memories can even be formed in people's minds. If an individual cannot remember their first day of school in second grade, does that mean they are not the same person they were on that day, even if they can remember other events before and after that time?

If an individual recalls a false memory, does that part of their identity exist even though it is not real? Are they creating an identity that is imaginary? I think the answer to these questions is clear. Our identities cannot be proven to exist anywhere in particular.

This brings me to 18th century philosopher, David Hume. Hume viewed identity as a collection of parts, or a “bundle”. An individual’s bundle might consist of their beliefs, preferences, societal roles, physical traits, memories, hobbies, etc. But the bundle is not held together by anything; there is no box or glue that keeps these aspects together. Hume argued that bundles change over time. So the bundle of an individual at birth is different from their bundle 20 years later. Hume would say that there are endless accessory properties that create us, but no essential property that gives us a concrete identity. We are simply changing perpetually, and therefore are incapable of having an identity that can be determined. We can be certain that we are changing from birth to death, from our physiological makeup to our psychology. But now that we have proved identity does not inherently exist, what is the importance of this finding?

Most can function in their everyday lives without having to ponder this argument. At face value it may appear meaningless if not trivial. But this conclusion actually holds many implications for the way society operates. From a practical standpoint, this discovery upends our promises, contracts, and responsibilities. If we are truly changing every moment of our lives, the meaning of responsibility crumbles. It means that a married couple is not tied to the vows they made at their wedding. In fact, an engagement ring can become meaningless if a fiancé changes the minute after they are proposed to. It means that society is flawed in the sense that it depends on a persistent identity in order to function, and this runs deeper than SSNs and legal names. Considering this argument, how do we hold each other and ourselves accountable if we are never the same people who took on responsibilities in our past? This is a question I do not yet have an answer to, but I think the role of identity needs to be re-evaluated in the context of relationships, personal view of oneself, and society.

DIALEXICON VOLUME 2

JULY 2022

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**THE UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO DEPARTMENT OF
PHILOSOPHY**

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Dialexicon Journal

Volume 2 - July 2022

dialexicon.org/journal

